



U.S. Department of Justice

Office of Justice Programs

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

Comparison of Drinking Rates and Problems: European Countries and the United States

Introduction

Among Americans there is a commonly held perception that American young people drink more frequently and experience more alcohol-related problems than do their European counterparts. This perception, in turn, is often utilized as argument for various changes in U.S. alcohol policies and prevention initiatives, including elimination of minimum drinking age laws and development of programs that teach 'responsible' drinking to young people.

Do European young people drink less and experience fewer problems than their American counterparts? Until recently data did not exist to easily answer this question, but new research demonstrates that this is not the case. In fact, in comparison with young people in the United States,

- a greater percentage of young people from nearly all European countries report drinking in the past 30 days.
- for a majority of these European countries, a greater percentage of young people report having five or more drinks in a row.
- about half of the European countries have intoxication rates among young people that are higher than the intoxication rates in the United States, about a quarter had lower rates, and about a quarter had equivalent rates as the United States.

Based on this analysis, the comparison of drinking rates and alcohol-related problems among young people in the United States and in European countries does not provide support for elimination of U.S. minimum drinking age laws or for the implementation programs to teach 'responsible' drinking to young people.

Do young people from Europe drink more responsibly than do young people from the United States?

This question is important because it is often raised in the context of the stricter minimum drinking age laws in the United States. Although the implementation of the uniform minimum drinking age of 21 and the more recent enactment of zero tolerance laws have reduced drinking by young people and saved thousands of lives (e.g., Hingson, Heeren, & Winter, 1994; Voas, Tippetts, & Fell, 1999; Wagenaar, O'Malley, & LaFond, in press; Wagenaar, 1986; Wagenaar & Maybee, 1986), these policies have recently come under attack as contributing to irresponsible styles of drinking. Commonly, Europe is held up as an example where there are more liberal drinking age laws and attitudes, that in turn, foster more responsible styles of drinking by young people. It is often asserted that alcohol is more integrated into European, and especially southern European, culture and that young people there learn to drink at younger ages within the context of the family. As a result, it is further asserted that young Europeans learn to drink more responsibly than do young people from the United States. This report addresses the question of whether young people in Europe actually drink more responsibly than those in the United States. Data for this paper come from the 1995 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) and the 1995 United States Monitoring the Future Survey (MTF).

European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD)

The ESPAD survey collected data in 1995 from 15- to 16-year-old students in 26 European countries. The data were obtained using anonymous self-administered in-school surveys. Sample sizes ranged from 543 (Faroe Islands) to

8,940 (Poland). The samples were designed to be nationally representative in each case.¹ Because not all questions were asked in all countries, the data reported here are based on somewhat fewer than 26 countries. A detailed report on the methods and findings from the ESPAD survey is available (Hibell, Andersson, Bjarnason, Kokkevi, Morgan, & Narusk, 1997).

Monitoring the Future Survey (MTF)

The MTF survey is conducted annually among 8th, 10th, and 12th graders in the United States. The samples are designed to be nationally representative of students in those grade levels. The data reported here are for the 10th grade sample because it represents the same age group that was included in the ESPAD surveys. The 10th grade MTF survey comprises an anonymous self-administered questionnaire given in the school setting. The 1995 MTF survey included 17,285 10th graders. Detailed descriptions of the MTF methods and findings may be found on the Internet (<http://monitoringthefuture.org/>) or in a series of publications available from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (e.g., Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, 2000).

Comparability

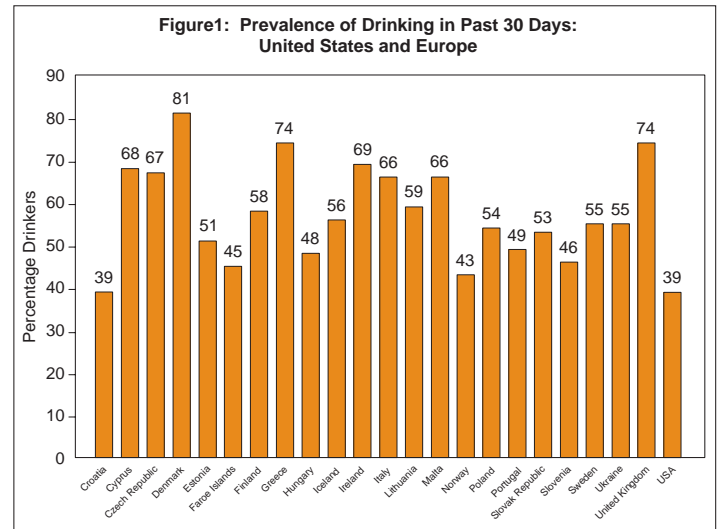
The questionnaire for the ESPAD survey was closely modeled after the MTF survey. Most of the questions from the two surveys map closely onto one another. One notable difference is in the heavy episodic or binge drinking question (i.e., “how many times have you had five or more drinks in a row?”). Specifically, the ESPAD survey asks this question in terms of the last 30 days whereas the MTF survey asks about the previous 2 weeks.

Results

Prevalence of Drinking in Past 30 Days

Figure 1 shows the percentage of young people in 21 European countries and the United States reporting that they had at least one drink of any alcoholic beverage during the past 30 days. These 30-day prevalence rates are often used as an indicator of the number of current or regular drinkers in a population. In the 1995 MTF survey, 39 percent of 10th graders reported that they had a drink in the past 30 days. It is clear from Figure 1 that the United States is a low consumption country by European standards. With the excep-

tion of Croatia, every European country in the ESPAD survey had higher prevalence rates. In most cases, the rates of current drinking far exceeded those observed in the United States. Croatia and the United States had equivalent prevalence rates on this measure.



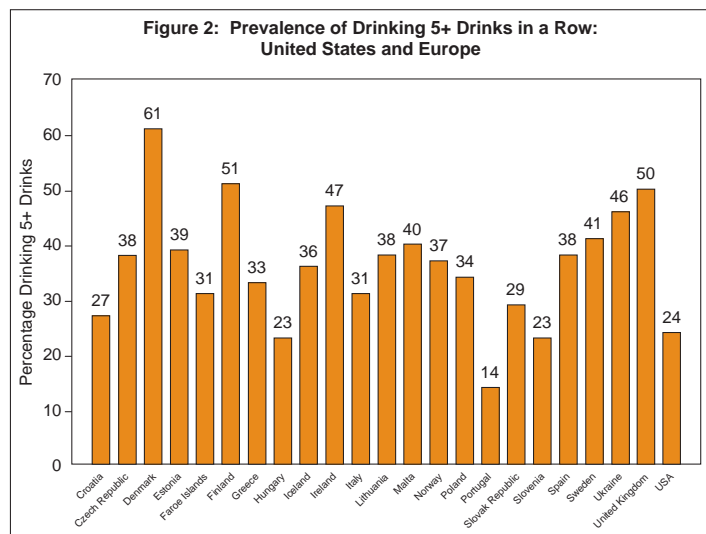
Sources: 1995 ESPAD Survey and 1995 Monitoring the Future Survey

Prevalence of Having Five or More Drinks in a Row

Although the data in Figure 1 show that fewer American adolescents are current drinkers than is the case for a vast majority of European countries, what is not clear is if the patterns of drinking are such that European adolescents are more at risk for problems. It may be, for example, that more of them drink, but do so moderately in a family context. Consuming five or more drinks in a row is one measure of heavy episodic or binge drinking that is frequently used. This style of drinking is known to be associated with increased risk for a number of problems including DUI, fighting, truancy, and involvement in criminal activities such as theft, burglary, and assault (e.g., OJJDP, 2000; Wechsler, Molnar, Davenport, & Baer, 1999). The prevalence of binge drinking from the ESPAD and MTF surveys is shown in Figure 2. If the early socialization to drinking that is assumed to be typical of Europe is such that it fosters responsible drinking, then we would expect to see much lower rates of binge drinking there than in the United States. Contrary to these expectations, U.S. adolescents show lower prevalence rates for drinking five or more drinks in a row than most European countries in the ESPAD survey. In

¹The sample for Turkey was limited to Istanbul and was not nationally representative. Classroom nonparticipation for Latvia was very high (51%), calling the representativeness of that sample into question also. Data for Turkey and Latvia are therefore not presented in this report.

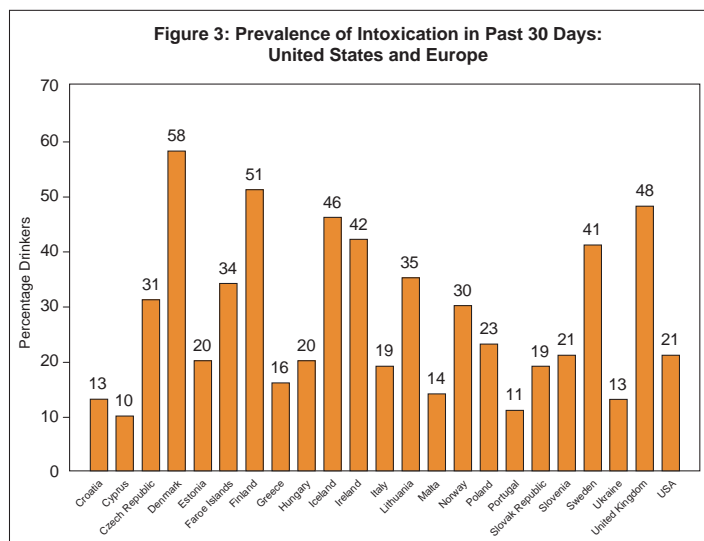
many cases, the percentage of young people reporting drinking five or more drinks in a row is considerably higher than that for the United States. Only Portugal (14 percent) has a substantially lower rate than is seen for the United States (24 percent). It should be noted that the rates for the United States are lower than those for Italy (31 percent), Greece (33 percent), and Spain (39 percent), countries that could be considered typically southern European.



Sources: 1995 ESPAD Survey and 1995 Monitoring the Future Survey

Intoxication

Another measure of problematic drinking is intoxication. Unlike the measures of binge drinking, the items addressing intoxication were identical between the ESPAD and MTF surveys. Thus, direct comparisons can be made with certainty. As with binge drinking, intoxication is associated with a wide variety of personal and social problems. To the extent that the more liberal policies and attitudes toward drinking in Europe contribute to a more responsible drinking style among adolescents, one would expect to find lower rates of intoxication among young Europeans. Figure 3 displays the 30-day prevalence rates for self-reported intoxication for European and American adolescents. As with binge drinking, adolescents from the United States show a moderate rate of intoxication (21 percent) compared with their European peers. The United States is higher on this measure than some countries (e.g., Portugal, Cyprus, Greece), lower than others (e.g., Denmark, Finland, Ireland, United Kingdom), and essentially equivalent to still others (e.g., Italy, Poland, Hungary, Slovenia). There is no evidence that the stricter laws and policies regarding drinking by young people in the United States are associated with higher rates of intoxication. Equally, there is no evidence that the more liberal policies and drinking socialization practices in Europe are associated with lower levels of intoxication.



Sources: 1995 ESPAD Survey and 1995 Monitoring the Future Survey

Summary

Recent data from representative surveys provide no evidence that young Europeans drink more responsibly than their counterparts in the United States.

- A greater percentage of young people from nearly all European countries in the survey report drinking in the past 30 days.
- For a majority of these European countries, a greater percentage of young people report having five or more drinks in a row. Only for Portugal did a lower percentage of young people report this behavior.
- About half of the European countries in the survey had higher prevalence rates for self-reported intoxication than the United States, about a quarter had lower rates, and about a quarter had rates that were more or less the same as the United States.

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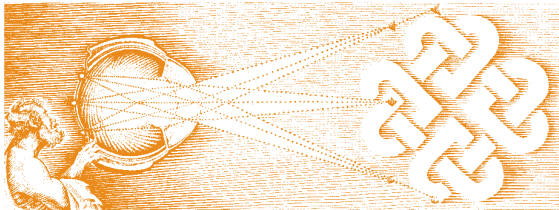
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TO KEEP CHILDREN
ALCOHOL FREE

“Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free” is a multi-year public-private partnership developed to combat the number one drug of choice among children—alcohol. The initiative was prompted because children are using alcohol at young ages with health consequences that can persist into adulthood. The initiative enlists the active support of Governors’ spouses as catalysts to create a momentum for change, with a focus on children 9 to 15. The partnership is funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism; The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; Office of Research on Women’s Health; Office of Research on Minority Health; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

This guide was written and analysis developed by Joel Grube, Ph.D., Prevention Research Center, in response to a request from the “Leadership to Keep Children Alcohol Free.”

The Underage Drinking Enforcement
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